

Mediocrity Syndrome in Russia

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 258
June 2013

Vladimir Gelman
European University at St. Petersburg/University of Helsinki

Numerous experts reason that Russia is a normal country with a mid-range level of socioeconomic development. In other words, if one likens countries to students, Russia is a C-grade student: neither among the best in class like Finland or Singapore, nor among the worst like Zimbabwe. It is of an average mediocrity akin to Argentina.

Even though such evaluations of Russia over the last decade are hardly unique, they have been met by a quite shocking reception among educated Russians. Across many generations, the government's propaganda—correctly or not—claimed the global superiority of the Soviet Union in numerous categories. Later on, during Soviet collapse, the country was placed in a dramatically lower “school” class and the assessment of Russia's global role reverted to the opposite pole, leading some intellectuals in the early 1990s to deny *any* achievements of Russia throughout its entire history.

Today, the recognition of Russia's rank-and-file international position has become a painful burden for some of its citizens—especially for those who have aspired to be among the best and brightest domestically. For instance, Boris Akunin, the eminent liberal-minded Russian novelist and vocal spokesman for the opposition during the 2011-2012 wave of political protests, vividly complained in his popular blog that Russia has “turned into a global periphery.”

For many of the country's elite and ordinary citizens, such a realization has led to frustration and a conspicuous assertiveness. They have become hostage to a kind of “mediocrity syndrome,” which has contributed to escapism and the open rejection of the ideas and values of A students. They search for a miraculous upswing, to turn Russia into a class leader without major effort. The consequences of this mediocrity syndrome are not helpful for solving Russia's real problems.

In Search of an Exit Choice

Similar to descendants of noble families, Russia has always cared about maintaining its prestige and status. This is why many Russians (and not only the elite) have reacted to

the multiple changes in today's world and Russia's shifting global role with rising feelings of disillusionment and alienation, taking the form of nasty words rather than active deeds. In the early 1990s, Michael Burawoy labeled this type of reaction to Russia's post-Communist transformation as "involution." Albert O. Hirschman, back in 1970, used the term "exit" and juxtaposed this form with active protest, or "voice." While Russia occupies a midrange (or sometimes much lower) position in international rankings of socioeconomic development, rule of law, science, and education, one can observe a variety of "exit" strategies among Russian citizens, especially among those who should not be regarded as C students on the domestic landscape. Many elderly, poorly educated, and impoverished inhabitants of Russia's small towns and rural areas rarely bother themselves with existential issues, let alone the global positioning of their country. However, the great expectations of the educated and relatively well-to-do residents of large cities meet the tough global reality in different ways. No wonder that Russia's elites and also a visible share of its educated class have become victims of the mediocrity syndrome in one way or another, often with the following manifestations:

- 1) escapism, oriented toward the search of false (and/or imagined) alternatives to the status quo;
- 2) open and conspicuous denial of ideas and values brought to Russian soil by A students from the West (as well as from the East); and
- 3) attempts to find or invent a miraculous panacea, which will allow Russia to surpass international competitors and proudly promote the national "here and now" (if not once and forever) without major effort.

In a sense, increasing signs of would-be emigration among Russia's middle class, such as active investment into the language capacities of their children, can also be perceived of as a kind of exit, like C students looking to switch schools in the hopes of becoming A-level overachievers elsewhere.

Let us elaborate on the above typology. First are those who do not create trouble but waste their own potential. A significant number of Russian scholars, pundits, and media personalities are highly aware of their country's low degree of competitiveness in the changing global intellectual market. Their strategic occupation of sometimes exotic ideational niches allows them to preserve a certain influence, status, and funding. They are akin to those quiet and lonely C students who devote their time to useless and riskless ventures like computer gaming instead of homework. These ideational niches in present-day Russia are mostly oriented toward reinventing the greatness of the Russian past, with means ranging from reestablishing outdated Orthodox doctrines to reinventing decrepit brands such as "Moscow as the Third Rome." These ideational trends are typical not only for longstanding reactionaries but also for some intellectuals who initially produced some interesting insights but are now contaminating the atmosphere with their marginal and peripheral visions. Escapists often justify their ideational position by referring to Russia's glorious past, but in truth their arguments are often similar to historical reenactments by amateur actors who don the armor of

medieval knights (some of these people even get stuck in character and wear their garb every day). Even the most stubborn Russian niche thinkers, however, understand that their ideas are doomed to remain within a narrow and nearly forgotten intellectual ghetto.

A second more active and aggressive manifestation of the mediocrity syndrome is based upon an explicit and demonstrative rejection of what was called in the Gorbachev era “new political thinking.” While the values and institutions of the West over the last quarter century have been recognized in Russia as normative guidelines for the country’s future, some thinkers disregard these views, similar to C students who prefer to juxtapose their jolly ignorance onto some A students. Blaming the West for real or imagined sins has become a mainstream pastime not only within the discourse of state-sponsored Russian media, but also among some independent-minded intellectuals. They often compete with each other to loudly express their disdain for political correctness, minority rights, and, most of all, the monstrous public enemy called “liberalism.” The problem of this alternative, however, is twofold. Not only does the “disgraced” West pay no attention to this gloomy rant, the public, to whom these comments are largely addressed, is also sick and tired of listening to conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated claims that such views represent the mainstream of Russian public discourse.

Moreover, these anti-Western crusaders have not been able to propose any viable alternatives to the “despised” Western values and institutions. Despite the ubiquity of arguments about the uniqueness of Russia that serves to justify talk about the need to protect it from Western influence in politics, culture, or education, they cannot produce positive ideals different from those of the “hated” West. In reality, vicious attackers of Western ideas and institutions look like mutineers on their knees: even the harshest anti-Westernists prefer to drive a Mercedes (or at least a Toyota), use an iPhone (or at least a Samsung), and want their children and grandchildren to graduate from Oxford (or at least Harvard). This is why the extensive anti-Western rhetoric in Russia has limited substantive relevance, to some degree resembling a similar (and similarly useless) late Soviet practice. Finally, we note that even though C students in class somehow resemble their failing counterparts, one should not put them in the same category: the latter often reject learning entirely, while the former are rather mimetic and their explicit envy of A students does not preclude them from implicitly following the leaders.

Third, the compensatory reaction of adolescent C students often manifests itself in the form of a highly visible performance: they attempt to launch some ill-considered move in order to demonstrate their toughness (or coolness) to other students, irrespective of appearance and consequences. The strong Russian tradition of building Potemkin villages is widely recognized (it has been a ruse since the eighteenth century). We see it these days in the hosting of major global events such as the 2014 Winter Olympics or the 2018 FIFA World Cup. More broadly speaking, while some business people in Russia are known for their conspicuous consumption of luxury goods, Russia’s educated class is more deeply engaged with the conspicuous consumption of status-oriented intellectual goods, a movement implicitly aimed at turning themselves

from C students to A students through the pursuit of high-class attributes and accessories. For example, government-sponsored “nongovernmental” organizations held a series of high-level Yaroslavl Global Policy Forums that not only included then-president Dmitry Medvedev and powerful politicians like Italy’s then-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, but also some global intellectual stars such as Nobel winner (and critic of American capitalism) Paul Krugman. This event was basically presented as the Russian equivalent of the Davos World Economic Forum. In a similar vein, the Kremlin sponsors the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, a Russian asymmetric response to Freedom House and other international organizations with democracy promotion agendas. The Russian institute has two branches, in Paris and New York, and it serves to monitor violations of human rights in Europe and the United States. Such tremendous efforts have brought rather modest results, however. Attempts to highlight and oppose human rights violations in the West have been limited to second-rate copycat publications, while the Global Policy Forum exhausted its potential in parallel with Medvedev’s decline.

Of course, not all the Russian government’s claims to enjoy new global leadership are completely useless. Some of its status-seeking efforts can have certain positive effects. For example, a program aimed at propelling five top Russian universities into the ranks of the most prestigious globally will contribute to the rise of investment in academic infrastructure, as well as the international advancement of some scholars and scientists. But the scope of these globally-oriented innovations and their impact on the rest of the Russian system of higher education, which has suffered greatly, remain unclear.

Some moves might bring material and non-material benefits to major proponents of various exit choices for Russia, although it is doubtful they can endure. “You cannot fool all the people all the time,” to quote Abraham Lincoln. Likewise, one cannot fool *oneself* all the time. To put it bluntly, programs to rapidly thrust Russia from C-grade to A-grade in the metrics of the global community tend to be groundless and poorly designed, and are likely destined to become unfulfilled promises.

Argentina of the North?

Russia is not the only country that seeks to reorient itself after experiencing the loss of global (or regional) leadership. France, for example, promoted its internationally recognized culture (from fine arts and cinema to *haute cuisine*) as a relatively successful substitution for the decline of its former grandeur. As to the international experience of other mid-range/second-order countries, the closest example for present-day Russia might be Argentina, one of the fastest-growing nations of the early twentieth century. It then muddled through numerous troubles and unsuccessful dictatorships (and democracies). It finally lost even its regional leadership to the more dynamic Brazil. Argentina’s adjustment took decades and was quite dramatic.

Further aggravation of the mediocrity syndrome in Russia will contribute to preserving the above-mentioned pathologies almost by default, making it more difficult to overcome its intellectual trap. If the status quo persists over time, as Russia’s

classmates move forward, one should not be surprised if in the next two decades the country's standing will be perceived around the globe as somewhere between Eastern Europe and Western China. Moreover, few will care about it beyond the region; the problems of Argentina are visible in Latin America, but they are not important to the rest of the world.

But is there any other solution to the mediocrity syndrome for a C level country? After all, most C students are not mediocre in *every* subject. They often love certain classes and are able to achieve major successes in specific fields. A teenager who loves dolphins but is insensitive to the writings of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky can become an excellent marine biologist. A young musician who cannot comprehend multiplication tables may one day play in a world-class orchestra. (Despite Argentina's failures, it gave birth to brilliant worldwide phenomena such as tango, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortazar, and Diego Maradona.)

Whether in school or among the countries of the world, accepting one's C status is a path to honest self-assessment, which can lead to a careful selection of appropriate subjects to pursue and a systematic effort to achieve excellence in those niches. Despite the fact that many Russians would agree with their country's C status, in most instances this understanding is limited to words rather than deeds: no major actions follow this recognition, neither at the level of government policy nor in individual life strategies. Russia's sub-average report card does not mean that it is worthless and lacks future prospects. It is just that Russia needs to find relevant areas in which to apply its as of yet unfulfilled potential.

Elliott School of
International Affairs

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

PONARS
EURASIA

NEW APPROACHES
TO RESEARCH AND
SECURITY IN EURASIA

© PONARS Eurasia 2013. PONARS Eurasia is an international network of academics that advances new policy approaches to research and security in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the [Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies \(IERES\)](#) at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. The publication was made possible by grants from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. www.ponarseurasia.org